



TO: Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety

FROM: Sara Kohlbeck, MPH
Director, Division of Suicide Prevention
Comprehensive Injury Center
PhD Candidate, Institute for Health and Equity
Medical College of Wisconsin

Andrew Schramm, PhD
Assistant Professor, Trauma & Acute Care Surgery
Medical College of Wisconsin

DATE: May 6, 2021

RE: Please Support Senate Bill 200, Relating to Grants to Prevent Suicide by Firearm

The Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) strongly supports Senate Bill 200 (SB 200), and applauds the work of Senator Kathleen Bernier and Representative Jesse James for their authorship and advocacy of this legislation, as well as the leadership of Chairperson Van Wanggaard and the members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety for holding a public hearing on this important legislation.

Every year, hundreds of Wisconsinites lose a parent, spouse, brother, or sister to suicide. Suicide is a complex and preventable public health issue. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death overall and the second leading cause of death among individuals ages 10 to 34 in the United States. Firearm suicide is a concerning issue. Two-thirds of all incidents of gun violence are suicides, and nearly half of all suicide deaths in Wisconsin were the result of a firearm injury. In addition, over 90% of individuals who attempt suicide using a firearm end up dying by suicide. This is because firearms are a highly lethal mechanism of injury, and when a firearm is used in a suicide attempt, there is very little opportunity to intervene to save a person's life.

As noted, roughly half of suicides involve a firearm. However, this percentage is higher among some groups. According to the recent report, *Suicide in Wisconsin: Impact and Response*, approximately 70% of veterans who died by suicide in Wisconsin used a firearm. There are a few reasons for this, including higher firearm ownership rates among veterans than among non-veterans. For this reason, policy efforts, such as AB 193, are critically important in advancing suicide prevention efforts that focus on veterans.

MCW has been actively involved in several suicide prevention efforts over the last several years. Sara Kohlbeck, MPH, is the Director of Suicide Prevention at the Comprehensive Injury Center at MCW and is also a PhD candidate in Public and Community Health at MCW. Ms. Kohlbeck also serves on the Steering Committee of Prevent Suicide Wisconsin. Andrew Schramm, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and Assistant Professor of Trauma & Acute Care Surgery at MCW. Mr. Schramm is also president of the Wisconsin Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Dr. Schramm's clinical and research focus includes suicide prevention.

The MCW Comprehensive Injury Center is currently engaged in several efforts aiming to prevent veteran suicide. One project, Remembering the Lost, is conducting interviews with families and loved ones of veterans who died by suicide in Wisconsin to uncover biopsychosocial factors that contributed to their suicide. Additionally, this project is examining differences in suicide rates in veterans based on their discharge rating. A veteran's discharge rating is the discharge they receive when they leave military service (for example, honorable discharge or general discharge). This information is important as we know that access to VA services is dependent on discharge rating, and many veterans who die by suicide in Wisconsin do not access VA mental health services.

The Comprehensive Injury Center is also engaged with the Southeast Wisconsin Task Force for Veteran Suicide Prevention. Through our work with the task force, MCW has submitted a funding proposal in partnership with the VA to evaluate the effects of a mass marketing campaign that focuses on promoting safe storage of firearms among veterans who may be experiencing a mental health crisis.

Finally, the Comprehensive Injury Center is convening a Milwaukee Suicide Review Commission, founded by Ms. Kohlbeck and Dr. Schramm, and one of the efforts of the commission is to standardize the collection of veteran information by medical examiners as they investigate suicide deaths. Receiving data on veteran status when a suicide occurs is very important in planning prevention activities.

The Froedtert & Medical College of Wisconsin (F&MCW) Regional Trauma Center is Eastern Wisconsin's only Adult Level I Trauma Center, providing the highest level of specialty expertise, meeting strict national standards with specialized teams, facilities and equipment available around the clock, 365 days a year, to treat life-threatening injuries.

At the F&MCW Trauma Center, rates of self-inflicted injuries increased 70% from 2019 to 2020. A firearm was used in 30% of these cases, and 83% of those who died from the attempt despite emergency medical treatment had used a firearm. These findings, which demonstrate that firearms are associated with a significant portion of suicide deaths, were presented last week at the American Association of Suicidology conference.

Related to AB 193, and the overall landscape of suicide prevention strategies in Wisconsin, partnering with firearm retailers and firearm ranges has a significant potential impact by providing grants to train staff at these settings to identify at-risk individuals, disseminate materials on suicide prevention to these audiences, and would allow for safe storage of firearms for individuals in crisis.

Clinical psychologists work extensively with individuals who have attempted suicide or who are considering it. When someone is in crisis, time is needed to connect that person with resources and to treat any mental health issues that are contributing to the crisis. The good news is that there is a strong evidence base for doing so—mental health disorders are treatable. We need to make resources accessible to those seeking help, which this bill would facilitate.

Additionally, making safe storage of firearms as accessible and easy as possible for someone in crisis buys precious time to intervene. It can keep someone from making a split-second decision that results in their death or, if they survive, significant injury. Oftentimes, patients are open to storing their firearm elsewhere temporarily, while working through their crisis, but do not have someone that they trust to give the firearm to. This legislation would address this barrier by opening options for safe firearm storage.

Providing funding for safe storage for firearms for veterans and others in a mental health or suicide crisis is critically important for suicide prevention. Voluntary safe storage of firearms during a crisis provides time and space between a veteran and a highly lethal mechanism of injury, and this has been shown to prevent suicide. Engaging firearm dealers in this effort is also innovative and important as it helps meet veterans and others in the community, where they are, while engaging business owners who can make a difference. This critical legislation has the potential to save lives in our state.

Thank you for your consideration of this legislation, and please support Senate Bill 200. If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Nathan Berken, Director of Government Relations at 414.955.8217, or nberken@mcw.edu.